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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 001992

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SUBJECT: AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA INFORMATION - SRI LANKA

REF: A) COLOMBO 1592, B) STATE 209622, C) COLOMBO 1849,
D) COLOMBO 1845, E) COLOMBO 1622

1. (U) THIS IS THE SECOND CABLE REPORTING ON PREPARATIONS UNDERWAY TO PREVENT A HIGHLY PATHENOGENIC AVIAN INFLUENZA (HPAI) IN SRI LANKA (REF A) AND RESPONDS TO REF B QUESTIONS REGARDING SRI LANKA'S EFFORTS TO CONTROL AVIAN FLU AND ITS CAPABILITY TO RESPOND TO AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC.

PREPAREDNESS/COMMUNICATION

2. (U) PREPAREDNESS: SRI LANKA IS STILL DEVELOPING ITS "NATIONAL INFLUENZA PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS PLAN" (NATIONAL PLAN). AI PREPAREDNESS ACTIVITIES ARE BEING ORGANIZED BY THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH (MOH) AND THE DEPARTMENT OF ANIMAL PRODUCTION AND HEALTH (DAPH) OF THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, WHO HAVE FORMED A JOINT STEERING COMMITTEE ON AVIAN INFLUENZA (STEERING COMMITTEE) AND A JOINT NATIONAL TECHNICAL COMMITTEE (TECHNICAL COMMITTEE).

3. (U) THE STEERING COMMITTEE ACTS AS THE NATIONAL BODY RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL THE POLICY DECISIONS TAKEN ON PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF AI IN THE COUNTRY. IT WILL OVERSEE THE FINALIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL PLAN, WHICH IS STILL IN THE DRAFT STAGE. THE STEERING COMMITTEE IS CO-CHAIRLED BY DR. H.A.P. KAHANDALIYANAGE, THE DIRECTOR GENERAL OF HEALTH SERVICES OF THE MOH AND DR. S.K.R. AMARASEKERA, THE DIRECTOR GENERAL ANIMAL PRODUCTION AND HEALTH OF THE DAPH. OTHER MEMBERS INCLUDE DR. H.M. FERNANDO, DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES (WHO IN REF E WAS ALSO NAMED AS THE OFFICIAL POINT OF CONTACT FOR AI ISSUES), ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL ANIMAL PRODUCTION AND HEALTH, CHIEF EPIDEMIOLOGIST OF EPIDEMIOLOGY UNIT MOH, DIRECTOR GENERAL MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, REPRESENTATIVES FROM MINISTRIES OF FINANCE, MEDIA AND TOURISM AND REPRESENTATIVES FROM WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) AND FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO). THE STEERING COMMITTEE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR COORDINATING THE PREVENTIVE ACTIVITIES AMONG ITS VARIOUS MEMBER AGENCIES AND FOR MONITORING THE ACTIVITIES.

4. (SBU) ON NOVEMBER 3, SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE STEERING COMMITTEE BRIEFED EMBASSY OFFICIALS ON ITS EFFORTS, AND GAVE A DRAFT COPY OF THE NATIONAL PLAN WHICH HAS NOT YET BEEN RELEASED. WHEN THE NATIONAL PLAN IS FINALIZED, IT SHOULD BE RETRIEVABLE AT: [HTTP://WWW.EPID.GOV.LK](http://www.epid.gov.lk). IT APPEARED FROM THE BRIEFING THAT GSL OFFICIALS HAVE TAKEN BOTH PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION NEEDS INTO ACCOUNT IN THEIR PREPARATIONS.

5. (U) THE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE SET UP UNDER THE STEERING COMMITTEE WILL BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MONITORING THE GLOBAL AI SITUATION AND FOR IDENTIFYING HIGH-RISK AREAS AND POPULATIONS. IT WILL AIM TO ESTABLISH AN EARLY WARNING SYSTEM FOR SRI LANKA, RECOMMEND SUITABLE STRATEGIES TO PREVENT ENTRY OF DISEASE TO THE COUNTRY, EVALUATE ONGOING ANIMAL AND HUMAN SURVEILLANCE ACTIVITIES, STRENGTHEN CAPACITY OF LABORATORIES AND FACILITATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NATIONAL PLAN.

6. (U) THE TECHNICAL COMMITTEE WILL BE CO-CHAIRLED BY THE ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR GENERAL ANIMAL PRODUCTION AND HEALTH AND THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR GENERAL PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES OF MOH. ITS MEMBERS INCLUDE THE HEAD OF MICROBIOLOGY DEPARTMENT - UNIVERSITY OF KELANIYA, THE DIRECTOR HEALTH EDUCATION BUREAU, THE DIRECTOR OF ANIMAL HEALTH, THE DIRECTOR OF VETERINARY RESEARCH, THE DIRECTOR OF THE MEDICAL SUPPLIES DIVISION OF MOH, THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH OF MOH, DIRECTOR QUARANTINE OF MOH, THE CHIEF EPIDEMIOLOGIST, EPIDEMIOLOGICAL UNIT OF MOH, THE CHIEF ANIMAL QUARANTINE OFFICER, THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF POULTRY DEVELOPMENT, THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH - VETERINARY SERVICES, VIROLOGISTS FROM THE MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE, VETERINARY SURGEONS/EPIDEMIOLOGY AND VETERINARY SURGEONS/GIS MAPPING, THE VETERINARY RESEARCH

OFFICER/VIROLOGY AND OFFICIALS FROM THE WHO AND THE FAO.

17. (SBU) ANTICIPATED TRUTHFULNESS/TRANSPARENCY: POST EXPECTS THAT SRI LANKA WILL DISCLOSE THE APPEARANCE OF AI FAIRLY RAPIDLY. ALTHOUGH AN OUTBREAK OF MYOCARDITIS WAS NOT REPORTED QUICKLY TO THE WHO IN EARLY 2005(REF A), WHO'S SEAT ON THE STEERING COMMITTEE SHOULD ENSURE SPEEDY REPORTING. FURTHER, THE STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS APPEAR EARNEST IN THEIR EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY AI AND CONTAIN IT AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE.

18. (SBU) KEY OFFICIALS: THE GSL IS HIGHLY BUREAUCRATIC. SPEEDY MOVEMENT ON PROJECTS DEPENDS IN PART ON THE LEVEL OF PERSONAL CONTACT A MINISTER OR MINISTRY SECRETARY HAS WITH THE PRESIDENT. WE ANTICIPATE THAT NIMAL SIRIPALA DE SILVA, MINISTER OF HEALTH, NUTRITION AND WELFARE, MINISTER OF HEALTH AND MAITHIRIPALA SIRISENA, MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, IRRIGATION AND MAHAWELI DEVELOPMENT, BOTH JUST NAMED TODAY, WILL BE KEY CONTACTS FOR HIGH-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT. IN THE CASE OF AN AI OUTBREAK, THE GSL WILL LOOK TO THE PRESIDENT FOR LEADERSHIP.

19. (SBU) PRIORITIZING AVIAN FLU: UNTIL AI HITS SRI LANKA, WE DOUBT THAT AI PREPAREDNESS WILL TAKE PRIORITY OVER TSUNAMI RELIEF, MAINTAINING THE CEASEFIRE WITH THE LIBERATION TAMIL TIGERS OF EELAM (LTTE), A REVISED NATIONAL BUDGET AND VARIOUS PROGRAMS THAT PRESIDENT RAJAPAKSE WILL ATTEMPT TO IMPLEMENT. ADDITIONALLY, SINCE SARS DID NOT HIT SRI LANKA DESPITE ITS PROXIMITY TO SOUTHEAST ASIA, SRI LANKA HAS NOT FELT THE DAMAGE THAT SUCH A PANDEMIC CAN CAUSE.

110. (SBU) BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL COOPERATION: THERE IS A STRONG ADVISORY AND COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE GSL MINISTRIES/DEPARTMENTS INVOLVED IN AI PREPAREDNESS AND THE WHO. WHO'S LOCAL OFFICER RESPONSIBLE FOR AI ISSUES IS DR. BIPIN KUMAR VERMA. DR. VERMA SITS ON THE STEERING COMMITTEE, AND IS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN ADVISING THE GSL ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF AI PREPAREDNESS, INCLUDING DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL PLAN. WHO HAS ALSO BROUGHT AN EXPERT ON LABORATORIES FROM INDIA TO ADVISE SRI LANKA ON STRENGTHENING ITS LABORATORY SYSTEM. POST HAS HELD SEVERAL MEETINGS WITH WHO OFFICIALS ABOUT AI AND HAS DISCUSSED THE POSSIBILITY OF INITIATING A MULTI-LATERAL WORKING GROUP (OF INTERESTED EMBASSIES AND MULTI-NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS) TO COORDINATE POSSIBLE ASSISTANCE TO THE GSL AND PREPARE FOR OUTBREAK RESPONSE.

111. (SBU) ON THE ANIMAL HEALTH SIDE, THERE APPEARS TO BE A GROWING AI COLLABORATION BETWEEN FAO AND DAPH. DAPH RECENTLY SUBMITTED A PROPOSAL TO FAO FOR A TECHNICAL PROJECT INVOLVING DIAGNOSTICS AND TEST KITS, WHICH USAID UNDERSTANDS HAS BEEN APPROVED BY FAO. FAO IS ALSO WORKING ON A PROJECT WITH BOTH SRI LANKA AND INDIA FOR CAPACITY BUILDING OF ANIMAL DISEASE LABORATORY WORKERS, WHICH WILL ALSO INCLUDE DEVELOPMENT OF A REGIONAL LABORATORY WHICH MAY BE CONSTRUCTED IN INDIA, BUT COULD PROVIDE SUPPORT TO SRI LANKA.

112. (SBU) FLU SHOTS: NEITHER PUBLIC NOR PRIVATE FACILITIES PROVIDE ANNUAL FLU VACCINE IN SRI LANKA. ANNUAL FLU SHOTS HAVE NEVER BEEN ADMINISTERED HERE. AT THIS TIME, THERE IS NO CAPACITY TO PRODUCE ANNUAL FLU VACCINES. NO PRODUCTION OF H5N1 VACCINE IS UNDER DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA. TAMIFLU IS NOT AVAILABLE IN SRI LANKA AND IS UNDERGOING AN EXPEDITED REGISTRATION PROCESS REQUIRED FOR ITS IMPORT INTO THE COUNTRY. SRI LANKA IS NOT EMPLOYING VACCINATION AS A CONTAINMENT MEASURE FOR ANIMALS EITHER, AS ANIMAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES ARE NOT CERTAIN OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SUCH VACCINES. DAPH NOTES THAT DEVELOPED COUNTRIES DID NOT USE VACCINATION, AND IMPLEMENTED MEASURES AT THE OUTSET OF THE DISEASE TO ERADICATE IT WITHIN THEIR BORDERS.

113. (SBU) A MODERATELY INFORMED POPULATION, BUT NOT ENOUGH INFORMATION FOR THE FARMERS: GSL OFFICIALS DESCRIBED THE USE OF MEDIA OUTLETS AS THE MOST EFFECTIVE METHOD OF INFORMING THE PUBLIC ABOUT AI. AS REPORTED IN REFS B AND C, THE GOVERNMENT-OWNED MEDIA HAVE TAKEN A SERIOUS BUT MEASURED APPROACH TO AI IN SRI LANKA, AN APPROACH MEANT TO DISPEL PANIC AND REASSURE THE PUBLIC THAT THINGS ARE UNDER CONTROL. ALTHOUGH THE INDEPENDENT MEDIA HAVE PRESENTED THE AI STORIES WITH A GREATER SENSE OF URGENCY, THEY HAVE ALSO EXPRESSED CONFIDENCE IN THE GSL'S ABILITY TO TAKE ON THE DISEASE SHOULD IT REACH SRI LANKA. SUCH ARTICLES HAVE OFTEN INCLUDED INFORMATION REGARDING SYMPTOMS AND PREVENTION.

114. (SBU) SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, AN OFFICIAL FROM THE SRI LANKA POULTRY ASSOCIATION WAS REPORTED TO SAY THAT FARMERS ARE GENERALLY NOT KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT AI. INDEED, THOSE HANDLING BIRDS (AS EITHER SMALL SCALE FARMERS OR POULTRY INDUSTRY) MAY BE AT A FAIRLY LOW LEVEL OF AWARENESS. IN AN ATTEMPT TO INCREASE AWARENESS, LEAFLETS ARE BEING DISTRIBUTED TO FARMERS, AND EFFORTS ARE BEING MADE BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS TO

INFORM THEM OF SYMPTOMS AND PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES.

SURVEILLANCE/DETECTION

15. (U) DAPH IS UNDERTAKING ACTIVITIES TO PREVENT THE INITIAL SPREAD OF AI TO SRI LANKA AND TO IMPROVE SURVEILLANCE. CURRENTLY, IMPORTATION OF LIVE ANIMALS AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS FROM ALL COUNTRIES IS PROHIBITED. DAPH IS ALSO MONITORING THE MOVEMENTS OF MIGRATORY BIRDS PASSING THROUGH SRI LANKA AND HAS IDENTIFIED AROUND 80 MIGRATORY WATER FOWL SPECIES THAT ARE PROSPECTIVE CARRIERS OF AI. SEVEN WILDLIFE PRESERVES AND NATIONAL PARKS IN THE NORTH, WEST AND SOUTHEAST WHERE BIRDS MIGRATE HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS VULNERABLE AREAS. THE NORTH WESTERN PROVINCE OF THE COUNTRY IS ALSO CONSIDERED VULNERABLE DUE TO WIDESPREAD PRACTICE OF SMALL STAKE-HOLDER FREE-RANGE POULTRY PRODUCTION. DAPH AND PARTNERING UNIVERSITIES ARE CARRYING OUT RANDOM BLOOD TESTS AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS (WITH PRIORITY ON THESE VULNERABLE AREAS) AND SCREENING BLOOD SAMPLES FOR THE AI VIRUS. THE PEAK MIGRATORY PERIOD IN SRI LANKA IS SEPTEMBER THROUGH DECEMBER. THOUSANDS OF SAMPLES OF BIRD DROPPINGS HAVE BEEN TESTED IN THE VULNERABLE AREAS; TO DATE ALL HAVE BEEN NEGATIVE.

16. (SBU) CURRENTLY, THE DAPH HAS A NETWORK OF APPROXIMATELY 350 ANIMAL HEALTH OFFICERS AT DISTRICT LEVELS, 30-40 VETERINARY SURGEONS IN EACH OF THE COUNTRY'S NINE PROVINCES, AND FIVE VETERINARY INVESTIGATION OFFICERS (VIOs) NATIONWIDE. DAPH HAS INSTRUCTED ALL AGRICULTURE AND VETERINARY PERSONNEL TO BE VIGILANT FOR, AND REPORT, EVEN MINOR SYMPTOMS OF AI. THE FIVE VIOs HAVE RESPONSIBILITY TO CONDUCT TESTING IF ANY SYMPTOMS ARE REPORTED.

17. (SBU) WHEN A VIO RECEIVES A REPORT OF AI SYMPTOMS, THE FOLLOWING PROCEDURES ARE PLANNED:

- A SURGEON WEARING PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT WILL COLLECT THE BIRD AND DELIVER IT TO THE VIO.
- THE VIO WILL DELIVER A SAMPLE TO THE VETERINARY RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN PERADENIYA (CENTRAL SRI LANKA - KANDY DISTRICT); CURRENTLY THE ONLY FACILITY WITH TESTING KITS FOR INITIAL INFLUENZA DIAGNOSIS. (SRI LANKA DOES NOT HAVE CAPABILITY TO DIAGNOSE H5N1.)
- IF INITIAL LAB TESTS DO NOT ELIMINATE THE POSSIBILITY OF H5N1 (THROUGH OBSERVING CHARACTERISTICS NOT IN CONFORMITY WITH H5N1), THE SAMPLE MUST BE TRANSPORTED OUT OF SRI LANKA TO LABORATORIES IN INDIA, HONG KONG, SINGAPORE OR THE USA FOR FURTHER TESTING.

18. (SBU) DAPH AND THE MOH ACKNOWLEDGE THAT DIAGNOSTIC ABILITIES ARE SEVERELY LIMITED IN SRI LANKA AND THEY ARE IN NEED OF ENHANCEMENTS IN THE LABORATORY AND TESTING CAPABILITIES. DAPH HAS REQUESTED THAT THE GSL PROCURE ADDITIONAL TEST KITS AND EXPRESSED THAT USG ASSISTANCE IN PROCURING TEST KITS AND TRAINING IN DETECTION OF THE VIRUS WOULD BE GREATLY APPRECIATED.

19. (SBU) TRANSPORT OF THE SAMPLES INTERNALLY MAY ALSO BE PROBLEMATIC AS MOST PROVINCIAL AND DISTRICT ANIMAL HEALTH (AND HUMAN PUBLIC HEALTH) OFFICES ARE SHORT ON VEHICLES. ONE POTENTIAL OBSTACLE TO COLLECTION AND DIAGNOSIS MAY BE LONG ROAD DISTANCES (8-12 HOURS) TO VULNERABLE REMOTE AREAS. MOH OFFICIALS ALSO FORESEE POTENTIAL PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL AND PRIVATE SECTOR PROTOCOLS TO ALLOW THE QUICK TRANSPORTATION OF POTENTIALLY-INFECTIOUS SAMPLES OUTSIDE OF THE COUNTRY VIA COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT. TRANSPORT OF SAMPLES OVER LONG DISTANCES MAY ALSO RISK PROLONGED IDENTIFICATION OF THE VIRUS. WITHIN THE PAST FEW YEARS, A SAMPLE WAS FLOWN OUT OF THE COUNTRY FOR DIAGNOSIS, AND WAS RENDERED UNUSABLE AT THE LAB. THE OUTBREAK WAS NEVER IDENTIFIED, AS THE OUTBREAK ENDED BEFORE ANOTHER SAMPLE COULD BE COLLECTED.

20. (SBU) NO COMPENSATION SCHEME IS CURRENTLY IN PLACE FOR POULTRY FARMERS WHO SUSPECT THAT THEIR BIRDS ARE ILL. A PROPOSED COMPENSATION MECHANISM TO REIMBURSE POULTRY FARMERS IN THE EVENT OF AN OUTBREAK HAS BEEN PRESENTED TO THE CABINET BY AN INTER-MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE. THE MECHANISM WOULD INVOLVE PAYING APPROXIMATELY USD 0.22 FOR A DAY OLD CHICK, USD 1.20 FOR A LAYER AND USD 1.00 FOR A BROILER. THIS IS AROUND 50-60 PERCENT OF THE MARKET VALUE OF THE ANIMALS. AROUND USD 800,000 WILL BE REQUIRED TO COMPENSATE FOR THE CULLING OF THE ENTIRE POULTRY POPULATION IN THE COUNTRY. (COMMENT: THE GSL COULD BE PENNY WISE AND POUND FOOLISH IN OFFERING BELOW-MARKET RATES FOR AI-INFECTED POULTRY. LESS THAN USD 1 MILLION MORE INVESTED IN ERADICATION COULD PRESUMABLY ENSURE AN END TO AI-INFECTED POULTRY BY OFFERING FARMERS FULL MARKET VALUE FOR THEIR FLOCKS. END COMMENT.)

RESPONSE/CONTAINMENT

121. (U) STOCKPILES: AS NOTED ABOVE, SRI LANKA HAS NO STOCKPILE OF TAMIFLU. THE GSL HAS ANNOUNCED THAT SRI LANKA WILL HAVE ACCESS TO THE WHO STOCKPILE SHOULD AN AI PANDEMIC REACH SRI LANKAN TERRITORY. WE ARE STILL TRYING TO CONFIRM THIS. NEVERTHELESS, WE UNDERSTAND THAT TAMIFLU HAS NOT BEEN REGISTERED IN SRI LANKA (A REQUIREMENT FOR LEGAL IMPORTATION), ALTHOUGH HEALTH AUTHORITIES SAY THAT THEY ARE ATTEMPTING TO EXPEDITE ITS REGISTRATION. ADDITIONALLY, HEALTH AUTHORITIES REPORT THAT SRI LANKA DOES NOT HAVE A REASONABLE STOCKPILE OF PERSONAL PROTECTIVE GEAR.

122. (SBU) CONTAINMENT: DAPH and MoH staff report that plans are being drawn up for quarantine or cordoning off areas, preventing movement of animals and products in/out, and culling infected stocks if necessary. DAPH notes that any quarantine would be enforced by its Directorate and Animal Health Officers.

123. (SBU) In light of the general readiness and operational status of Sri Lanka's security apparatus as a result of the civil conflict, and its fast response following the December 26, 2004 tsunami, containment could be effectively enforced - once the outbreak is actually diagnosed. However, the potential for a lengthy delay from the incidence of an outbreak to official diagnosis to political action for containment is worrying. Further, inadequate hospital facilities (Ref A) remain a continuing concern.

124. (SBU) COMMENT: PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL PLAN REPORTEDLY WAS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE ON NOVEMBER 1. HOWEVER, THAT DATE CAME AND WENT WITHOUT PUBLIC COMMENT BY THE GSL. UNTIL ELECTIONS ON NOVEMBER 17, THE COUNTRY WAS LED BY A LAME DUCK PRESIDENT. GSL WORKING-LEVEL OFFICIALS MAY HAVE PRUDENTLY AWAITED THE NEW ADMINISTRATION SO THAT THEIR EFFORTS COULD BE APPROPRIATELY REVIEWED AND PUT INTO PLAY RATHER THAN CRITICIZED AS THE WORK OF THE PRIOR ADMINISTRATION. WE HOPE TO SEE A SPEEDY PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL PLAN, FOLLOWING THE NOVEMBER 23 NAMING OF NEW MINISTERS AND OTHER HIGH LEVEL OFFICIALS.

125. (SBU) SRI LANKA LACKS SEVERAL CRITICAL RESOURCES - TAMIFLU, LABORATORY EQUIPMENT, UP-TO-DATE HOSPITALS. IT ALSO CURRENTLY LACKS HIGH LEVEL INTEREST IN MAKING AI A PRIORITY. NEVERTHELESS, WORKING LEVEL OFFICIALS CONTINUE DEVELOPING PLANS AND SEEKING RESOURCES TO COMBAT A POTENTIAL PANDEMIC.

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